C.P.C.S.
(416) 750-2220

The Ottawa Citizen
Ottawa, ON
Dailies
Circulation: 135,495
12 May 98 444972

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General Jim Media Awareness

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These three little piggies went to the Net

Interactive game aims to give children cybersense about scams

BY CHRIS COBB

Three cute little piggies will be launched into cyberspace today on a serious mission: to begin "streetproofing" young children who surf the Internet.

Privacy Playground: The First Adventure of the Three Little CyberPigs is an interactive game for seven-to-10-year-olds and is designed to teach youngsters how to recognize Internet marketing scams and navigate around them.

The game is a creation of Canada's Media Awareness Network (MNet) and can be downloaded for free from their web site (www.media-awareness.ca).

Privacy Playground lasts about half an hour and features a series of questions directed at young cyber-surfers. The first piece of advice is against giving anyone online personal details, which one of the little pigs does — in exchange for a nice prize.

"Companies don't give you something for nothing," warns the game. "Little Pig has paid for her prize by telling the company more about herself."

Jim Carroll, co-author of the *Canadian Internet Handbook* and a member of the non-profit MNet, says corporations have a freewheeling attitude towards privacy issues and will take any personal information they can get.

"The risk is in voluntarily giving away information," said Mr. Carroll. "I'm stunned at the number of people who visit corporate web sites, fill in a form and tell some company they don't know where they live and how much money they make. It's bizarre."

According to one study, online advertising revenue in 1996 amounted to more than $300 million, with about 18 per cent generated by children. The same study estimates the total could reach more than $7 billion in five years. Last year, 36 per cent (4.2 million) of Canadian households had personal computers and about 1.5 million of those computers were wired to the Internet. By 2000, an estimated 3.4 million will be online.

Companies targeting children will typically offer gifts in exchange for personal information and will often mix advertising with online games so the two components become indistinguishable.

Mr. Carroll said a survey last year showed that none of Canada's top 10 corporations had privacy codes of conduct on their web sites — no promise of how they will handle personal information consumers give to them.

"I think that's pretty pathetic," says Mr. Carroll, who always uses Bill Gates when prompted for his name at a web site. "A lot of it is a marketing mindset — building customer profiles, one-on-one marketing — and they're saying, 'let's go for it' because there is no legislation and no rules. That mindset has to change. Maybe everybody surfing the net should tell corporations that they are Bill Gates and earn $200 million an hour. Corporations will soon realize that the whole exercise is futile."

A scene from Privacy Playground, which claims to help youngsters spot scams on the Internet.

The next three little pigs adventure, *Cybersense and Nonsense*, will target hate groups on the Internet and will take place in a chat room where children will see the pigs get drawn into a flaming war (an exchange of insults) with a new member of the chat club called Wolfie. The game will feature sites dedicated to hating pigs and hating wolves.

Number three in the series, still early in development, will deal with sexual victimization of children.